“When I was coming down here, I didn’t think I was going to live for a long time,” says Shera, her brown eyes filling with tears. “Because I thought someone will hurt me or I was going to starve.”

Just 19 years old, Shera drove towards the border from Montreal this February with no idea where to go. Her mother had just told her she couldn’t stay with her and her stepfather and siblings. And so, with her dual French and American citizenship (but not Canadian), Shera headed for Vermont. “It was the closest place.”

Worried about her, a border patrol officer looked up shelters in Burlington and sent her to an address on Main Street. But when she arrived, she couldn’t find the shelter. A young woman passing by took her to the COTS warming shelter. “She didn’t want to leave me alone,” Shera says.

Born in New York to Guinean parents, Shera moved to France as a young child and lived outside Paris with her mother, stepfather, and siblings. Her trouble started when, at the age of 15, her mother wanted to arrange a marriage for her and Shera refused. They moved on from the disagreement, but it left a rift in their relationship. When the family moved to Montreal for better work opportunities, Shera went to high school there. But once she graduated, the rest of the family was granted permanent residency in Canada and Shera was not. Unable to work or continue in school, she went to live with an aunt in Indiana.

Soon after that, her mother became sick and Shera rushed back. “I got scared and wanted to be close to them.” Her mom, it turned out, was pregnant and kicked Shera out without explanation. Shera didn’t want to go back to Indiana: she was continued on back
Mark’s Mission Moment

It’s Not Just a Bed

How your support opens a world of possibilities.

I want to share something Allie, our Drop-In Coordinator, recently said in an interview because it’s such a great explanation of how YOU are helping our youth dream big:

“When those kids come through our doors, they’re survivors. And we shower them with as much love as we possibly can, because they’ve made it. At 18 years old, they have an opportunity to start again, and make their life better than they could have ever dreamed. Because it’s not just a bed.

“When they walk into our programs, we really try to make them think big. What would life look like in five years if it did get better?

“At that moment, you can see a change, because they’ve never been given that hope, they never knew that that was possible.

“It’s not just a bed. It’s somebody who’s going to talk to them about a career path and education, they’re exploring new interests and hobbies, they’re working with a counselor to undo all of that damage. If they’re successful in that program, they can go from the Landing, our shelter, to our long-term residential program, and when they leave, they are going to college. We are cosigning leases for youth in the community, so when they go into that apartment, they can keep that apartment, keep that job, and we continue those supports until they don’t need them anymore.”

Thank you for opening up this world to our youth!

Wow! We’re Speechless!

Over 2,800 of you slept outside overnight or donated to this year’s Sleep Out!

And thanks to you, our doors will be open for the next youth who needs help.

This year’s Sleep Out left us feeling all warm and fuzzy. Just under 400 students and over 100 adults braved the elements and spent the night outside in the cold in solidarity with Vermont’s youth who are homeless or facing homelessness.

If you’d like to get involved in next year’s Sleep Out in March, email us at events@spectrumvt.org and we’ll be in touch this fall!

“When I dropped off dinner at the Drop-In Center, I could see people’s faces light up when they saw the meal.”

Callahan Freeman of Williston chose to volunteer at Spectrum for her 8th grade challenge. She spent countless hours organizing the kid’s craft table for our annual Empty Bowl Dinner, coordinating a coat drive at her school for Spectrum youth, cooking meals for our Drop-In Center, and organizing her own Student Sleep Out team with friends.
A Safe and Inclusive Space

Thanks to you, we are working with multicultural youth to help them connect to one another, develop leadership skills, and navigate the many resources our community has to offer.

Last summer, we launched the Multicultural Youth Program to help ethnically diverse youth, many of whom identify as New American, get the support they need to transition to a thriving adulthood.

In addition to a youth leadership program and social events, much of this work focuses on working one-on-one with young people of color to help them dream big as they move to life beyond high school.

As part of this program, our first Youth Conference was organized, led, and attended by youth from a wide range of backgrounds. It created a safe, engaging space where they could address some of the struggles and triumphs they experience every day—the pressure and pride that accompanies being seen as “different,” questions about substance use, how to navigate and become more involved in their own communities, and deciding on their future paths. Participants told us that they felt valued and that their voices matter to others.

“A parent told me that at school, her daughter is continuously bullied for the color of her skin. At the conference, her daughter was surrounded by other youth who look like her and who have similar life experiences—a space without racism,” said Maggie, a Spectrum AmeriCorps member.

Thanks to your support, this was a day when so many of our youth felt empowered and strong.

Jacques Okuka and Aimerance Kasango (who presented at the conference).

How You Can Help

Spectrum’s Legacy Society

If you have written Spectrum into your will or have chosen us as a beneficiary on your retirement account, you are already a member of our Legacy Society. Thanks to you, teenagers and young adults can get the help they need for generations to come.

If you’d like to join the Legacy Society, contact:
Sarah Woodard
Director of Development
802.864.7423 x350
swoodard@spectrumvt.org

You Save Lives!

Thanks to you, our youth were fully outfitted for winter last year. Here are some things we’re looking for this fall. Items can be brought to our office at 31 Elmwood Avenue in Burlington. Thank you!

Our Wishlist
new socks (especially ankle socks)
backpacks
lip balm
feminine products
clothes hangers
women’s professional clothes (S, M)
men’s shoes — sizes 10-12 (especially sneakers)
headphones
winter boots
tents
sleeping bags

Jacques Okuka and Aimerance Kasango (who presented at the conference).
being pressured to marry her aunt’s boyfriend to help him get a green card. Instead, she drove toward the closest U.S. border, not knowing where she would land or how she would survive.

At COTS, a case manager told Shera about Spectrum, because we serve young people her age. The Landing (our shelter) was full, but our Drop-In Center staff gave her a place to take a shower, get new clothing and food—and took her under their wing.

“Shera walked in to Drop-In and immediately made a connection with staff and peers alike,” says Allie, our Drop-In Coordinator. “Her optimism, sense of humor, and benevolence spread over the room. Her resiliency, strength, and kindness have amazed us. When Shera comes in to Drop-In these days, she often says how grateful she is for finding our program. I hope she knows how grateful we are that she found us, too.”

She almost immediately got a job—two of them, in fact: an early morning shift at McDonalds and one at TJ Maxx in the afternoons, and was able to start saving. A few weeks later, she was able to get into the Landing.

Today, thanks to you, just four months since that lonely and fearful drive towards the border, Shera is renting a room in a house with a family she adores.

A new job as a phlebotomist with regular hours is moving her closer to her dream of becoming an anesthesiologist. And she has met with counselors at the Community College of Vermont and plans to start school in January. She still comes to Drop-In every week to check in and get help with any issues that come up.

“I thought it was crazy what I was doing when I was driving here but I didn’t know what else to do,” she says. “If something happened to me, who will realize that I disappeared? But Allie will realize, because she always cares about me. I had nothing and people were helping me. I feel like I was still part of society. I wasn’t completely left out.”